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A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF KATE CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Appalachian State University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
the Department of English.

Boone, North Carolina

December 1972

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DALE LYNN KAUFMAN. A Critical Evaluation of Kate Chopin's The Awakening. (Under the direction of Dr. Mary M. Dunlap.)

In The Awakening, Kate Chopin weaves structure, character, and technical devices into a controlled thematic unit. All of the elements employed in the novel fully complement and reinforce one another. The point toward which all of the elements progress is the revelation of the ultimate awakening of the protagonist--the awakening to which the novel's title refers. The manner in which Chopin develops her novel suggests that Edna Pontellier's ultimate awakening revolves around an irrevocable decision and subsequent act of the will at the end of the novel. Although first impressions of the events at the end of the novel might suggest the tragic, the signals provided by structure, character, technical devices, and the theme thus derived indicate a positive tone.

The structure of the action moves Edna in a cycle from an inhibited childhood to the acceptance of a recognition of the nature of life. Edna's final act comes as a result of the need to escape from the cycle--to ultimate freedom and solitude. In addition to structural revelations, Edna's continuous growth is also depicted through the presentation of contrasting and complementing characters. Along with her acceptance of universal reality, there is an equal suggestion of Edna's rebirth and regeneration. The pattern of

imagery woven throughout--particularly the conventional use of the sea--is a major source for finding the novel's thrust a positive one. In addition, the recurrent image of the waking animal suggests a thematic origin arising in Kate Chopin's first sketch, "Emancipation. A Life Fable." In this study, the text of The Awakening is examined to demonstrate an optimistic reading in place of existing tragic interpretations.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Since its publication in 1899, Kate O'Flaherty Chopin's The Awakening has been the subject of only a handful of critical discussions. Much of this existing criticism has been concerned with biographical, literary, and social influences operant in the novel. These treatments have presumably resulted from the original adverse reaction with which The Awakening was received. As a result, such approaches to the novel appear to be predicated upon the need to correct the injustices done to the author and her work. This has been a necessary first phase of revival criticism, calling attention to the artistic merits of the novel and novelist which were overlooked or simply disregarded previously. Since the reprinting of The Awakening in 1964, critical attention and perspectives have been somewhat broadened, though still remaining, in various degrees, involved with biography, literary influences, and social issues.

Per Seyersted's recent critical biography of Kate Chopin[1] comes nearest to being the last word in discussing the variety of forces brought to bear upon the novel. Seyersted does indeed comment on the obvious similarity between The Awakening and Flaubert's Madame Bovary, and he makes the suggestion that The Awakening may be seen "as a woman's reply to a man's Madame Bovary."[2] Nevertheless, he

finds the novel to be an independent entity and "fundamentally not dated."[3] Although Seyersted does not engage in gross source- and influence-hunting, the result of his adherence to the more obvious correspondences (particularly with Flaubert) is the affirmation of certain notions predetermined by his view of the similarities. Although he suggests the presence of existential elements in the novel[4] and the explosion of the romantic myth of undivided passion,[5] Seyersted's vision is focused still upon what appears to him to be a physical, sensual, sexual awakening. After associating The Awakening with Flaubert, Seyersted's critical assessment of the novel seems consistent with this appropriate, but preconditioned, reading. Spirituality is not avoided; but, nevertheless, it is relegated to a subordinate position. The primary difference between Seyersted and earlier critics is that this kind of awakening does not disturb him. In addition, an awakening to sensuality certainly aids any attempt to find a unique place for the novel within its literary milieu and specifically with literary realism.[6]

Other critics have helped to prepare the way for Seyersted's work and have offered insights which are valuable contributions to any evaluation of The Awakening. Daniel S. Rankin, whose early biography of Kate Chopin[7] is now replaced by Seyersted's, must receive a great deal of credit for his work as the first major recognition of Mrs. Chopin's ability. Indeed, much of Seyersted's information comes from Rankin--the last source of contact with

Mrs. Chopin's friends and contemporaries. As his title indicates--Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories--Rankin favored the stories and sketches which allowed Mrs. Chopin to display her talent in the realistic portrayal of Creole life. The Awakening, in its departure from an emphasis on local color, is disturbing to Rankin. Rankin sees Mrs. Chopin's heroine, and her awakening, also in terms of the sensual and labels it "a tragedy of self-assertion."[8] Rankin does make some very legitimate assessments concerning other aspects of the novel--particularly concerning the character of the protagonist's husband--but his distaste for Edna Pontellier and her behavior pervades his brief chapter on the novel.

After the renewal of interest in The Awakening, following Cyrille Arnavon's introduction to the French edition of the novel (entitled Edna),[9] critics began to explore more of the novel. In his introduction to the first American reprint of The Awakening in 1964, Kenneth Eble pointed to the excellence of this "first-rate novel."[10] But, Eble exhibits awe that such a novel should have been written when it was, treating what it did. Like his colleagues, Eble is overwhelmed by "a mature married woman's awakening to physical love,"[11] possibly because, to the liberated sixties, the 1890's cannot have achieved a similar state of sophistication. Eble's chief contribution is his recognition of Mrs. Chopin's ability to "go beyond the limitations of regional material."[12] His astute comparison of Mrs. Chopin's heroine with Phaedra in the Hippolytus exemplifies such potential in the novel.[13] Eble successfully removes

the novel even from its own culture and time in suggesting its stature.

Lewis Leary also has dealt with Kate Chopin and her novel. In his introduction to the Rinehart edition of The Awakening,[14] Leary exhibits an interest in social and biographical questions concerning the novel. Like Rankin, Leary suggests that perhaps The Awakening is a tragedy derived from self--not of self-assertion, though, but self-deceit.[15] Leary's attention is drawn toward the basic nature of woman as revealed to him in the heroine--the "questing animal."[16] As a result, for Leary, Edna's awakening is "only vaguely intellectual" and is even more "disturbingly physical."[17] Leary does, however, raise several significant questions for contemplation[18]--questions which he does not attempt to resolve, though he suspects the importance of their answers.

In The American 1890s,[19] Larzer Ziff voices the prevailing attitude and resulting emphasis of recent criticism, including Per Seyersted's. Ziff's comment captures the essential source of fascination for recent commentators: "The Awakening was the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America, and the first fully to face the fact that marriage, whether in point of fact it closed the range of a woman's sexual experiences or not, was but an episode in her continuous growth."[20]

George Arms is probably the first critic to differ from the mainstream of criticism of The Awakening.[21] Arms is also the first critic to deal with the text of the novel to any significant extent.

He concentrates his study on the conflicts and polarities in the novel in order to remove it from the context of local color. Arms offers some stimulating possibilities for a psychological reading of the novel, which results in a lessening of emphasis upon the sexual in the novel. The primary weakness in Arms' approach is his attempt to break from the text and its evidence to suggest authorial intent rather than achievement.[22]

Since the publication of Seyersted's critical biography and his edition of The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, John R. May has produced a most significant study of The Awakening[23]--one that appears to mark the beginning of a new phase of criticism of the novel, following the establishment of Chopin's reputation by the first wave. May returns to, and works entirely with, the text of The Awakening to make a case for the importance of local color in the novel. May's point is well-taken, if slightly cloudy; but, more importantly, the method of May's madness signals that it is time to return to initial assumptions. Equally important, it recognizes that biographical, literary, and social influences have been adequately established, now allowing fruitful textual examination of the novel.

In a more recent article, Donald Ringe also demonstrates a reliance upon the text of The Awakening.[24] By adhering to the text, Ringe clears up some of the confusion concerning the literary categorization of the novel. Critics dealing with biography, social issues, and immediately observed influences on the novel have been responsible for the typical regard for The Awakening as an example

of literary realism. Ringe, by examining the text of the novel, and specifically the imagery, concludes that it is most reasonable to read the novel "in terms of the romantic concept of self."[25] Ringe argues for the theme of self-discovery, finding the novel more transcendentalist than realistic; and his primary tool for reaching this conclusion is the nature of the imagery.

As the May and Ringe studies demonstrate, there appears to be a need for a return to, and close examination of, the text itself, in order to determine what is taking place in this novel and how it is being accomplished. It seems time to return to the fundamentals--to character, theme, and style as found in the novel. Therefore, the primary focus of this study is The Awakening itself. However, there are certain of Mrs. Chopin's other works which are relevant and may be of help in delineating and determining points of character, theme, and style in The Awakening. In this regard, we will refer only to the works themselves and not to biographical material. In addition, where an extra-textual comparison can be made for the sake of example or clarity (rather than as a suggested influence), it will be done.

CHAPTER II: REVELATIONS OF STRUCTURE

Edna Pontellier is vacationing for the summer with her husband and children at the pension of Madame Lebrun, on Grand Isle. Although Edna married a Creole, she is aware of the differences between her own background and personality and those of the Creoles. She is essentially an outsider--an American woman, of Kentucky, Protestant heritage. While her husband, Léonce, spends his week in New Orleans tending his business, Mrs. Pontellier begins to feel a vague sense of oppression coming over her. Her only outlet for male companionship (even when her husband is there) is with the oldest son of Madame Lebrun, Robert. Under Robert's "tutelage," Edna begins to develop an awareness of herself in relation to others.

As Edna's feeling of oppression increases, so, too, proportionately, does her desire for expansion, exploration, and assertion of self. In addition to Robert Lebrun, she is "assisted" by other of the guests in her newly and dimly recognized desire for freedom. Two women, Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, have a pronounced influence on Edna. Her desire for freedom is further fostered through her first climactic encounter with the sea. With Edna's mastery of swimming comes the sense of exhilaration that carries her energetically forward. At this point she also realizes and accepts a deepening feeling for Robert. However, Robert rather suddenly and inexplicably

goes to Mexico, leaving Edna at the height of her desire. Nevertheless, she is a new woman, and she continues to revel in her new-found freedom, despite the absence of Robert.

Upon returning to her materially comfortable home in New Orleans, Edna's will has strengthened. Consequently, her desire to adhere to social propriety has diminished. The more regular presence of her possession-conscious husband and the absense of Robert are not insignificant in this shift in Edna's attitude.

After Léonce again leaves for business, Edna increases the intensity of her quest for personal freedom and expression. During this time she decides that she will move from her husband's house into a dwelling of her own, allowing her body to follow her spirit. She also conducts an affair with Alcée Arobin, a man of some reputation about town. The effect of this adventure is to heighten Edna's longing for Robert--to enjoy the same freedom of expression with the one who first stirred her soul. When Edna and Robert meet, following his return from Mexico, they voice their love for each other; but it is apparent that their expectations concerning the renewal of their relationship are quite different. During their most intimate of encounters, Edna is called to the bedside of the laboring Adèle Ratignolle. While a witness at this birth scene, Edna is reminded of the conflict between her own desires for self-assertion and her obligations in the eyes of society to her family.

Edna returns home, weakened from the birth scene, but strengthened by the excitement of returning to Robert and the consummation of their

love. When she enters the house, though, she finds Robert gone. He has left a note which tells her that he has again departed because of his love for her. During a sleepless night comes the realization that her physical being cannot follow the path laid by her spirit, without disastrous results, especially for her children. Only by one means may she emancipate body and soul together. The next day, Edna returns to Grand Isle, where, besieged by a clutter of thoughts and emotions, she seeks ultimate freedom and solitude by walking into the sea--consummating her awakening.

In the depiction of Edna Pontellier's spiritual upheaval, Kate Chopin brings together all of the elements she employs--character, image, symbol, setting--in a complex orchestral whole. As each note in a musical composition inevitably leads to another, and as a chord suffers irreversible damage without the interplay of all its constituent parts, so, too, do all of the elements utilized by Mrs. Chopin support, reveal, amplify, and interact with one another.

The focus of the novel is on character, for it is Edna's story; however, without the suggestions arising from revelations implicit in the structure of the novel, we would not do justice to an assessment of Mrs. Chopin's protagonist. Should we avoid the elements at hand, our perspective would be no better than that of many of the novel's own characters, who can see only surface characteristics and are puzzled by Edna's aberrant behavior.

Upon first reading The Awakening, we may come away with an impression of unexplainable optimism, despite the novel's apparently

negative ending. Herein lies the justification for a closer look at the patterns around which the various elements of the novel revolve. The development of Edna Pontellier, supported in full by her environment and the images which portray it, unfolds step by step to urge such a positive perspective. So subtle, yet so pervasive, are these patterns, that we are left with only an unexplainable, yet unwavering, conviction that we have not been witness to a tragedy.

The most crucial question--the question we must ultimately resolve--regards the significance of the novel's title. Precisely what is the nature of Edna Pontellier's awakening? To what does she awaken? Equally significant, when does this awakening occur? After these questions are resolved, we may determine the "how" of the matter by considering the manipulation of the various aspects of the novel.

Simply stated, Edna Pontellier awakes to reality--to the reality of her place in the universe, to life and its meaning. This is the ultimate awakening from which the title is derived. Early in the novel, the beginning of this dawning awareness is described: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her."[1] But, at this point in the novel, Edna is only dimly aware of her forming status, and is bewildered. She awakens early to her potential, but not until much later does Edna truly appear to comprehend both the

recognition of her relation to life and its meaning. The process that Edna is cognizant of is a feeling "as if her thoughts had gone ahead of her /body/ and she was striving to overtake them" (p. 290). The description of this feeling comes significantly after two climactic scenes--one after Edna's first sensuous swim in the gulf (p. 75), and the other following the birth scene at Adèle Ratignolle's (p. 290).

This feeling of trying to overtake thought signals two of the most important shifts which take place in the psyche of Edna Pontellier. But, we have four views of Edna given us: one is the view of her childhood from her own lips; the other three perspectives are given portrayal in the novel. What appears to take place is that Edna undergoes two awakenings (or shifts) prior to an awakening that is final and reveals the ultimate alternatives. This last awakening--the ultimate awakening--is the event to which the title alludes. These three awakenings then roughly divide Edna's life into four segments. These four segments appear to form a discernible pattern of development which influences a reading of the end of the novel. Roughly, the existing pattern progresses from childhood to reality to childhood to reality. Of course, this is an oversimplification and has little meaning stated in this manner, for each stage is of a different character, though the labels are the same. It is desirable to attempt to clarify this pattern further, and likewise this should help to clarify character, theme, and technical elements further.

The first two stages are outside the action of the novel as such, but nevertheless are important preludes to the repetition and variation of the last two stages. Edna's childhood receives significant attention and reference in the novel. Particularly important in this context is Edna's conversation on the beach with Adèle Ratignolle early in the story. Even as a child, we are told, Edna "apprehended instinctively the dual life--that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions"; and, as a result, she "had lived her own small life all within herself" (p. 35). Edna developed an outward reserve beneath which she cultivated her fantasies. For this reason, those few friends she attracted were also of this reserved character. Edna's early inward bent also fostered a propensity for conducting passionate relationships in her imagination. Her affections were, at different times, drawn toward a young cavalry officer, a young gentleman engaged to a neighbor, and, as a "grown young woman," toward a noted tragedian. Significantly, these fancies ran the course of dreams and remained only in her imagination "without causing any outward show or manifestation on her part" (p. 44).

During her conversation with Adèle, Edna's memory is aroused by the expanse of water before her to a vision of her childhood--"a delicious picture" (p. 41). The image is of herself walking, as if she were swimming, through a "meadow that seemed as big as the ocean" (p. 41). Although she does not remember, Edna decides that she must have been running from the gloomy reality imposed on her

by the intonation of her father's reading prayers at a Presbyterian service (p. 42). After relating this possible explanation for her presence in the meadow, Edna characterizes herself and the attitude implicit in her running, and she responds to her present state: "'I was a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question. . . . I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided'" (pp. 42-43).

In the midst of her passion for the tragedian, Edna lost the innocence of illusion and fancy--she met Léonce Pontellier. Their marriage is described as "purely an accident" (p. 46), fostered and encouraged by Léonce's flattering devotion and a sense of affinity of "thought and taste between them" (p. 46). The opposition of her family to her marriage with a Catholic played no insignificant role in propelling Edna into the second stage of her psychological life--the acceptance of and awakening to reality. From the youthful world of dreams and fancy Edna enters the life of conformity to social convention. There is a very clear shift in Edna's life: "As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams" (p. 47). Unlike some young women, though, Edna does not enter her marriage with any emotion closely akin to what we sometimes call "love." When her marriage is described as an acceptance of reality, it is almost wholly that--an acceptance of social reality,

of convention, of the institution, of what Doctor Mandelet later represents as Nature's artifice (pp. 291-92). As the marriage begins, the absence of an emotion more zealous than fondness is a circumstance, for Edna, devoutly to be wished: "She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution" (p. 47). This is the picture of Edna as she appears at the rise of the novel--an apparently satisfied, settled, mature, married woman.

Before we are allowed to become firm in this conviction, we learn very quickly (in the third chapter) that the reality of marriage has not been proved to Edna as the desirable institution it first appeared to be. The weight of obligation prescribed by convention is beginning to be felt by Edna if only vaguely. After Léonce admonishes Edna for her seeming neglect of the children, Edna goes out onto the porch and has what is described as a "good cry" (p. 15). Here is the first indication that Edna is troubled, suggesting her potential to seek to alter her present status. Edna is motivated to seek relief due to the pressure of the marital reality she sought. Accompanying this burden is "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (pp. 14-15). Several days later, in response to the ladies' compliments regarding Mr. Pontellier's generosity, Edna is significantly "forced to admit that she knew of none better" (p. 17, my emphasis). To this point in the

novel, Chopin prepares us to accept a woman who is becoming increasingly aware of an inner struggle and the need to resolve it.

The impression that Edna is preparing for another shift in outlook is strengthened by the distinctions between her and the Creoles with which she must associate. It is made very clear that Edna's background differs markedly from that of the Creole culture into which she has married; and, despite her marriage, while at Grand Isle, Edna "was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles" (p. 22). Edna feels a particular distinction between herself and the Creole women, and she is most impressed with "their entire absence of prudery" and their "lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (p. 23). Perhaps the most important distinction signalling an impending shift is found in one brief paragraph. Edna Pontellier is not one of the "mother-women" who are predominant at Grand Isle; she is not one of those "who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (p. 19). Although Adèle Ratignolle is the epitome of this type of woman, Edna cannot deny the influence of this woman in inducing her as she begins "to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" (p. 35).

Though Adèle appears to Edna the most obvious source of influence, we are at the same time aware of the decreasing subtlety of the influence of Robert Lebrun. Before Edna is aware of even the faintest feelings of desire, there is an indication of "a certain

advanced stage of intimacy and camaraderie" (p. 25). Robert is a Creole by blood only, for as a man he is more perceptive and sensitive than many of his fellows. When Adèle warns him to stay away from Edna, Robert responds in a fashion which suggests that he sees himself distinguished from his social orientation. "'You Creoles! I have no patience with you!'" he exclaims to Adèle (p. 51). Because of his sensitivity and his ability to facilitate her self-awareness, Edna is perfectly comfortable and at ease with the companionship of Robert.

In addition to the companionship which Robert affords Edna, he also serves as a vital initial link between Edna and the sea. The "sonorous murmur" of the Gulf is already beginning to arouse Edna's senses "like a loving but imperative entreaty," but it is Robert who acts as the tempter, insisting, "'The water must be delicious; it will not hurt you. Come'" (p. 31). In this context, Robert seems almost an agent for a higher authority--the Gulf Spirit.[2] As she yields and goes to the beach with Robert, the sea begins to assume its beguiling role, preparing Edna with the promise of her rapidly approaching change:

> The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.
>
> The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (p. 34)

Several weeks later on Grand Isle, after a large Saturday evening dinner, Edna is poised, literally and figuratively, on the verge of the first awakening intrinsic to the action of the novel. She is seated on the gallery between two realms--the Creole society and the eternal sea--listening to the strains from Mademoiselle Reisz's piano, her being for the first time "tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth" (p. 66). The artist's music, rather than evoking material pictures of "solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair," arouses these emotions themselves (p. 66). However, relief and freedom are at hand for Edna as Robert suggests for everyone "a bath at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon" (p. 67). Edna is prepared. The setting is prepared and described, as the group walks toward the beach, with images of freshness and calm:

> There were strange, rare odors abroad---a tangle of the sea smell and of weeds and damp, new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms somewhere near. But the night sat lightly upon the sea and the land. There was no weight of darkness; there were no shadows. The white light of the moon had fallen upon the world like the mystery and the softness of sleep.
>
> (p. 69)

Edna's first successful swim, and the emotions which accompany it, is the first climax toward which the action has been directed. This success marks the emergence of the "new" Edna that will

dominate the novel until almost the end, with the creation of a newer self by the ultimate awakening. Edna's emergence as a changed person is signalled by the sleeplessness which follows; Edna is literally awakened (p. 81). Sleeplessness will again signal Edna's ultimate awakening at the end of the novel (p. 299). Throughout much of the novel Edna sleeps or is drowsy, emphasizing the significance of sleeplessness at these two crucial points. Edna's intoxication over her new ability ushers her into her third stage--a stage similar to that of childhood, of dreams, allusion and caprice, as earlier asserted. Initially, Edna's swimming adventure is even referred to in terms of a child--"like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (p. 70). Immediately following her swim, Edna is with Robert when she experiences the "first-felt throbbings of desire" (p. 77). Edna has re-awakened to her propensity for the unattainable, for fancy. The same duality of life still exists, but it is reversed as Edna now proceeds to seek the fulfillment and manifestation of her dreams. The outward conformity is now subordinate to the inward self, and the inward questions are no longer questions as much as assertions. The "new" Edna does not bear the marks of reserve that characterized the "old" Edna. Edna now feels free to explore herself and her environment openly and honestly.

Throughout this the third stage in her development, Edna conducts herself in terms applicable to children; she is "blindly following

whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (p. 82). Other characters notice Edna's youthful traits; Robert remarks that she lacks forethought (p. 84), and Adèle comments to her, "'In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life'" (p. 250).

On the boat ride to the Chênière, Edna's sense of freedom becomes complete. As the boat nears its destination, Edna's inward realm of I's and me's opens to the outward expression of we's with Robert (p. 89). It is additionally significant to remember that it was Edna who sent for Robert (for the first time) to accompany her to the Chênière. Following Robert's departure for Mexico, her reversal and new status are recognizable even to herself: "For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman" (p. 116). Because Edna recognizes her childlike infatuation, however, she is not forced, as a character, also to become childish and immature. Her own ability to recognize where her thoughts are leading her body allows her to choose the conduct of her life. She need not become a child in any pejorative sense to display some qualities reminiscent of childhood.

Following the end of the vacation season and Edna's return to New Orleans, Mrs. Chopin establishes the strength of Edna's choice concerning the conduct of her life; the city has the power to force

the return of normality and routine. Edna's return to New Orleans does not diminish her desire for freedom; rather, by contrast to the city world of propriety, the "new" Edna is easily discernible.

Edna's return to the city must mark either a return to the old routine--the Tuesday reception days and the regular weekly attendance at the opera or the play--or she must visibly alter the "programme" that she "had religiously followed since her marriage, six years before" (pp. 128-29). We learn very quickly which alternative Edna chooses when she indifferently tells Léonce she decided not to observe les convenances of her usual reception day. As she had rebelled against her father by marrying Léonce (firmly committing herself to the social reality of marriage), Edna commits the same significant, "transitional" act against Léonce.

After Léonce leaves for his club in agitation, Edna forces herself to finish her meal before retiring to her room, her emotions stirring. At this point, like a frustrated child, Edna releases her emotions in an act of much significance to this, her childlike stage--she attempts to destroy her wedding ring (p. 135). Following this, there can be little doubt that the reality of marriage is unacceptable to her; for the first time, the conflict between reality and the inclination for another alternative appears. Now there exists a distinct dichotomy; and Edna is definitely not aligned with the polar position of reality. Through its symbol (the ring), she has literally attempted to deny and destroy the existence of reality, an act indicative of her total swing to the opposite pole. The

morning following the aborted attempt on the ring, Chopin emphasizes the disparity between Edna's new status and the world of reality. After Léonce's routine departure for work, Edna stands on the front veranda and faces a scene that is probably not unusual. She does not see this scene, however; rather, she "looked straight before her with a self-absorbed expression upon her face. She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic" (p. 138).

Later on the same day, Edna visits the home of the Ratignolles, where Chopin returns the focus to that one aspect of social reality from which Edna is most alienated--marriage. After being treated to a "little glimpse of domestic harmony" (p. 145), Edna is depressed. The lack of harmony in her own marriage, however, is not the source of depression for Edna, but rather the source is the institution which has the potential to produce either bliss or sorrow. For Edna, marriage "was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui" (p. 145). This feeling produces in Edna a corresponding feeling of sympathy for Adèle Ratignolle's uninspired existence, devoid of any moment of anguish or the taste of "life's delirium" (p. 145). This advocacy of "life's delirium" is indicative of the childlikeness to which Edna has returned. In addition, we also see Edna respond in a manner appropriate to her return to a childlike spontaneity and freshness; for what she had meant by "life's delirium" "had crossed her thought like some unsought, extraneous impression" (p. 145).

After the attempted destruction of her ring, Edna resolves not to bother with such futile outbursts. She now proceeds to do and feel as she pleases, "going and coming as it suited her fancy, and, so far as she was able, lending herself to any passing caprice" (p. 146). Now, when her husband is rude and critical, Edna is insolent, vowing "never to take another step backward" (p. 147). This vow is extremely ironic in light of Edna's "return" to a childlike state. However, the distinction between her actual childhood and her "new childhood" is now becoming increasingly clear. As previously noted, Edna's real childhood was characterized by inhibition and reserve. The behavior exhibited by Edna now is that of action; rather than seeking the fulfillment of her dreams in her imagination, Edna is actively seeking the actual fulfillment of her desires. She is becoming the exploring, open, "real" self--typical of childhood--which she had not allowed herself in her own childhood. As a child, Edna had put on the protective mask with which to present herself to the world--a mask normally not donned until adulthood. Now, as Léonce observes, Edna is plainly "not herself" (p. 147). Yet, "he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (p. 148). Like a child, Edna is the center of her own universe, doing things--painting, walking, living--only for herself.

A further indication of Edna's new affinity with the behavior of childhood is presented upon the arrival of her father for a visit.

His presence "seemed to furnish a new direction for her emotions" (p. 175). Here is the man she held in awe as a child and rebelled against as a young woman. Yet, in his company again, she finds she is more interested in him; "and for the first time in her life she felt as if she were thoroughly acquainted with him" (p. 179). With this statement, Chopin reinforces the picture of Edna as a "true" child--open, exploring, receptive. Now Edna is able to display and enjoy the love toward her father that she perhaps was unable to give him as an inhibited and fearful child. Edna engages in serving his wants with energy and relish.

When Doctor Mandelet dines with the Pontelliers and the Colonel, it is this "new" Edna with whom he is most impressed--he who also had known the "old" Edna. Doctor Mandelet

> noted a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life. Her speech was warm and energetic. There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun. (p. 181)

The Doctor's observation is perhaps the single most important description of Edna in the novel. The implication of an allusion to a sketch Chopin had written much earlier, in the last sentence of the Doctor's impression, provides a major, though not completely necessary, key for understanding the end of the novel.[3]

As the novel moves forward, Edna, in her new, receptive state, is introduced to and shares the company of Alcée Arobin. Like a

fascinated, impressionable child, Edna is cheerful and alive in Arobin's company. When they go out together alone for the first time, the day is "intensely interesting" for Edna: "The excitement came back upon her like a remittent fever" (p. 198). When Arobin impulsively bares the scar, the manifestation of his youthful bravado (p. 198), he is quick to perceive Edna's sense-responsiveness to impulse. Arobin sees enough in Edna's face to allow him to take her hand, while "his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness" (p. 199, my emphasis). We must note that Edna is yet to become the awakened Edna of the novel's title; we are being shown a process of becoming. Although Edna tries to muster the old reserve, attempting to hasten Arobin's departure, she lacks credibility in the endeavor now. As Edna contemplates the significance of Arobin's intimacy, a new conflict becomes apparent: "She felt somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity, and realizes the significance of the act without being wholly awakened from its glamour" (pp. 201-202). Importantly, Edna's sense of fidelity is directed toward her first awakener, Robert Lebrun, who at this time is virtually little more than the manifestation of an ideal. Although she is now free to explore her desires, Edna is reluctant to turn from the memory of Robert.

Despite the conflict, and because she underestimates her changing personality, Edna continues to cultivate her relationship with Arobin. As her relationship had grown with Robert, so, too,

does it grow with Arobin, "by imperceptible degrees, and then by leaps (p. 204). Finally reaching the stage of intimacy, Arobin is able to talk "in a way that pleased her at last, appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her" (p. 204). Although Arobin can stir the animalism within her, that animalism is impatient for release with Robert. He is the one who has the real potential, the one for whom Edna is saving the total response. Arobin is indeed the one who gives Edna "the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded" (p. 218). But, though the kiss is "a flaming torch that kindled desire" (p. 218), it is nevertheless the torch that guides Edna's awakened desire toward Robert (p. 219). In addition, when later Edna and Arobin make love (p. 242), it is treated so subtly, almost in passing, by the author that there is no attempt to indicate that Arobin has yet succeeded in bringing Edna's animalism into the open.

Although Edna's spirit stirs in the presence of Arobin, it is capable of being set free only by Robert, in absentia. This is accomplished with Mademoiselle Reisz serving as a medium between Edna and Robert. Mademoiselle Reisz's "divine art" reaches Edna's spirit and sets it free (p. 204); yet the effect which Mademoiselle's music achieves is in large part due to the images and responses evoked in Edna that are directly associated with Robert. On Edna's first visit to the Mademoiselle's, Reisz heightens Edna's longing for Robert by weaving a musical background that includes "the quivering love-notes of Isolde's song" while Edna is reading a letter from Robert (p. 166).

During her second visit to the Mademoiselle's, Edna announces her decision to move from her husband's home. Edna also makes an important resolution: "never again to belong to another than herself" (p. 208). In addition to emphasizing Edna's childlike concern for self, this resolution virtually eliminates the further possibility that Edna will feel the conflict of fidelity to Robert she had experienced while with Arobin. With Edna's resolve now apparent, the understanding artist delivers an announcement of her own to Edna--a letter from Robert declaring his intention to return. Before Edna reads the letter, however, Mademoiselle Reisz once again weaves an appropriate musical background to prepare Edna "for joy and exultation" (p. 210). When Edna leaves Reisz's room, she receives another form of preparation. The Mademoiselle tests Edna's shoulder blades to see if her wings will be strong enough to carry her above "the level plain of tradition" (p. 217). Although she only half comprehends the Mademoiselle's behavior, Edna is prepared by the comment as she is propelled toward another shift in outlook--her ultimate awakening.

The same evening, after she has left Mademoiselle Reisz's, Edna experiences the responsive kiss with Arobin, which serves to renew in Edna "a quicker, fiercer, more overpowering love" and desire for Robert (p. 219). Yet, in contemplation after Arobin left her, we sense an impending change in Edna, indicated by a new understanding: "She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life,

that monster made up of beauty and brutality" (p. 219). Now Edna is directing her own course, rather than being influenced and directed by others. In keeping with her resolution, Edna takes control, asserts herself, and exercises her ability to choose. By choice now, she still opts to seek the realization of her dream, particularly since Robert is returning; by choice she will attempt to capture the illusion.

In pursuit of self-expression, the first thing Edna proceeds to do is to finalize plans to remove herself physically from the realm of marital reality. Edna prepares to move into the "pigeon house," marking the occasion by an elaborate dinner (pp. 225-237). The dinner party takes on the qualities of ritual, giving the event the semblance of a rite of separation. However, during what was intended as a celebration, Edna feels "the old ennui overtaking her" (p. 232). The feeling that comes to Edna reminds us of the child: "There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable" (p. 232). Edna, here, is very much like the child, who, having concocted her game, cannot have it turn out as she wishes. Our sensing of the childlike becomes even stronger when Edna virtually ends the party by suppressing Victor Lebrun's singing of the song which she held meaningful to only Robert and herself (p. 236). The song only serves to heighten Edna's painful impatience and frustration for attaining her desire—Robert Lebrun.

Although she had experienced the let-down of the dinner party, following a letter from Léonce disapproving of her intended move to the pigeon house, Edna regains her strength of will. Here, Chopin makes the distinction between the Edna Léonce married and the woman she has grown to be:

> There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began [my emphasis] to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. (p. 245)

We note here that Edna's development is not static; she will continue to grow. Significantly, her ability to apprehend the depths of life is just now beginning to be exercised. It is the sophistication of this ability that will enable her to undergo the ultimate awakening. Only two significant events now remain before Edna undergoes her final change--before she has enough information to make her final choice: the return (and final departure) of Robert and the birth scene at Adèle Ratignolle's.

When, by accident, Edna and Robert meet at Mademoiselle Reisz's, there exists an obvious disparity between expectation and reality. We witness Edna's momentary disappointment when the dream becomes tangible: "She always fancied him expressing or betraying in some way his love for her. And here, the reality was that they

sat ten feet apart, she at the window, crushing geranium leaves in her hand and smelling them, he twirling around on the piano stool . . ." (pp. 256-257). However, as they go to Edna's house, Edna lets herself be drawn back into the beauty of the dream: "They went on around the corner, and it seemed as if her dreams were coming true after all, when he followed her into the little house" (p. 258). After the evening is complete, it having been of no consequence in the renewal of the relationship, Edna reflects upon the events of the day. In a dreamy stupor she recalls the pleasing presence of Robert this day. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between dream and reality is again brought to the front, though Edna is not fully cognizant of the significance of her observation: "But some way he had seemed nearer to her off there in Mexico" (p. 268).

Although Edna does not know when she will see Robert again, she resolves not to seek to penetrate his reserve (p. 269); however, she does not realize that they have reversed roles. It is now she who must act as the agent to draw from him his ability to express love. Despite her resolve, however, Edna chastizes Robert for staying away from her when they again meet, by chance, in the garden in the suburbs. Robert warns Edna that she is forcing him "into disclosures which can result in nothing" (p. 277). For the moment, Edna retreats, and Robert yields to her winning charm. After returning to the pigeon house, though, Edna's passion succeeds in drawing Robert from reserve to response (p. 280). In a scene filled with irony, Robert admits his love for Edna as he explains

the futility he feels as a third party to her marriage. The point to which Edna has now developed is quite clear when Robert's dreams of marriage with Edna are contrasted with her view of the character their relationship should assume:

> "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both." (p. 282)

In the midst of this scene, Edna is called to the bedside of the laboring Adèle Ratignolle. Edna bids Robert goodbye and elicits from him the greatest degree of passion he has yet shown (p. 283). Robert implores Edna to stay with him, but she tells him to wait for her and leaves him with the promise of fulfillment upon her return. Robert, who earlier in this scene had shown that he was facing the potential of their relationship realistically, has now been sensuously re-awakened to Edna, only to have her depart: "Her seductive voice, together with his great love for her, had enthralled his senses, had deprived him of every impulse but the longing to hold her and keep her." (p. 284).

The birth scene at Adèle's is brief but significant; here, the feelings that play so important a role in Edna's coming decision emerge. Edna is agonized and revolted by the scene she witnesses,

finding it analogous to a scene of "torture" (p. 288). As she bids her friend goodbye, Adèle poses half of the question Edna must resolve as she nears the point of decision: "'Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!'" (p. 289). As she departs with Doctor Mandelet, Edna reminds herself that, "'One has to think of the children some time or other; the sooner the better'" (p. 291). Edna seems to recognize that her children are a part of reality to which she may be, perhaps legitimately, forced to return. After Doctor Mandelet responds with his comment on youth and the artifice of Nature, it seems that Edna may be willing to capitulate and return to the realm of obligation and responsibility. For a moment Edna concedes that, "'perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life'" (p. 292). However, to do this would mean to disavow the personal growth she knows she has achieved. Knowing that Robert is waiting for her, Edna delays making a conclusion concerning the decision that even she now realizes must eventually be made--"but not to-night. Tomorrow would be time to think of everything" (p. 294).

When she arrives at her home with "the intoxication of expectancy" (p. 294), Edna finds Robert gone. In his place she finds only a note of farewell. Having had time to recapture his perspective, Robert chose not to pursue what he realized would have been an unbearably painful and futile relationship. Now Edna must make her decision sooner than she desired; but, now she

possesses the experience to choose, based upon her comprehension of the nature of life.

During the significant sleepless night that follows--the first night of sleeplessness since her initial encounter with the sea--Edna makes a decision which indicates that she has awakened to a final and ultimate reality. Edna shifts from the life of illusion she has lead to an acceptance of a universal reality encompassing a recognition of the existence of beautiful illusion and brutal social reality. Edna's acceptance of this new reality is exhibited in a positive decision to act accordingly; therefore, she asserts herself and exits a world consisting of only two elements. Edna cannot return to embrace the world of social reality from which she has divorced herself. Neither can she continue to pursue the fulfillment of the world of illusions and dreams without yielding her freedom and her self, specifically to her children. Therefore, she courageously, and finally, asserts herself through a decision that is hers alone---a decision that offers her the potential to be hers alone, dwelling, triumphantly, by choice in the "abysses of solitude" (p. 300). Edna's body finally catches up with her thoughts.

CHAPTER III: TECHNIQUE

In the previous chapter, the importance of structure to the revelation of Edna Pontellier's character and the novel's meaning was explored. Equally important to our understanding of the novel is the technique Mrs. Chopin brought to bear in the presentation of elements which complement the development of her main character. The Awakening has already been mentioned in terms of an orchestral unit. The "melody line" of the novel is to be seen in the structural development of Edna. The characterization of other characters in the novel, the pattern of imagery woven throughout, and the use of repetition and parallel elements provide "harmony" for, and suggest the progression of, the melody. An examination of Mrs. Chopin's use of character, imagery, and setting provides additional support for a reading of the novel in terms of the structure that has been discussed.

In the use of major supporting characters, Mrs. Chopin employs perhaps the simplest, yet most effective means by which to relate her protagonist. In traditional terms, each character (except Robert) is flat and static; therefore, through contrast, Mrs. Chopin is easily able to reveal the evolution of a many-faceted Edna Pontellier. All of the major supporting characters (as foils) provide stimuli that spur, guide, and propel Edna toward her ultimate

awakening. In this context, Edna is viewed as a reactionary personality.

Léonce Pontellier, Edna's husband, is the first and probably most influential character to whom Edna is contrasted. The behavior of Mr. Pontellier, whom Edna had married in a reaction to the opposition of her family (p. 47), precipitates Edna's first feeling of oppression. It is he who, "in a monotonous, insistent way," raises the issue of Edna's neglect of the obligations of motherhood (pp. 12-13). This behavior is typical of the behavior of Mr. Pontellier throughout the novel. Like Browning's Duke of Ferrara, Pontellier is insistent about his own way as well as being obsessed with possessiveness. When we first see Edna in the novel, we learn more about Mr. Pontellier than we do about his wife; for Léonce's descriptive comment concerning Edna's sunburn reveals him "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (p. 4). Mr. Pontellier is further characterized as a man who "greatly valued possessions, chiefly because they were his, and derived genuine pleasure from contemplating a painting, a statuette, a rare lace curtain--no matter what--after he had bought it and placed it among his household gods" (p. 128). Edna feels herself to be one of Léonce's gods. Her move to the pigeon house is made more significant when considered as an act of severance; she removes herself from Léonce's realm of gods.

Léonce Pontellier's behavior toward Edna becomes even more significant when we realize that it is not only against Léonce,

but also against what he represents that Edna reacts. Léonce Pontellier is the perfect picture of adherence to social propriety and reality; his basic belief in propriety is the source of the growing conflict with his wife. As Edna grows more firm in her desire to live for herself, and not for the sake of appearance, the more insistent her husband becomes. Mr. Pontellier's concern for appearances at the same time renders him impercipient--incapable of seeing beyond the superficial. Although he is somewhat indifferent toward Edna's emotional needs, most of the breakdown of the relationship is a result of his inability to see his wife's changing needs. Léonce continually makes physical, visual observations. The first thing he notices when he comes home on the first day Edna fails to hold her Tuesday reception is that she is wearing an ordinary house dress. Chopin takes the time here to note that he "was observant about such things" (p. 129). The morning following Edna's attempt to destroy her wedding ring, though she appeared "unusually pale and very quiet," Léonce merely "kissed her good-by, and told her she was not looking well and must take care of herself" (p. 137, my emphasis). When he becomes concerned about his wife's outward behavior, Mr. Pontellier goes to the wise Doctor Mandelet. Léonce gives the Doctor an assessment that is a further indication of how much he has failed to perceive: "'Yes, yes; she seems quite well,' said Mr. Pontellier, leaning forward and whirling his stick between his two hands; 'but she doesn't act well'" (p. 169, my emphasis). What he means to say is that she is not behaving in a socially

acceptable manner. What is socially acceptable to him, within the social institution of marriage, is only "a certain tacit submissiveness" to his will (p. 146). However, the unfamiliar impropriety with which Edna conducts herself, and which prompted him to visit the Doctor, shocks and angers him; Pontellier responds by becoming rude (pp. 146-147). Léonce virtually forces Edna to resolve never to submit her will, "never to take another step backward" (p. 147).

As opposed to the negative influence of Léonce Pontellier, the influence of Adèle Ratignolle on Edna is more positive. As the only other married woman of significance in the novel, Adèle provides an obvious contrast to Edna. Adèle is variously described as reminiscent of "the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams" (p. 19), "a faultless Madonna" (p. 26), and a "sensuous Madonna" (p. 28). However, the most important contrast between the two women is presented in the inclusion of Adèle as one of the mother-women, "fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood" (p. 19). Edna is quite the opposite; she is willful and grows even more so as her independence and self-assertion become more prominent goals.

Adèle Ratignolle influences Edna most significantly at two crucial points in Edna's development. Adèle's influence in the first part of the novel (on Grand Isle) is felt directly by Edna. Adèle plays a role in helping Edna "to loosen a little the mantle

of reserve" (p. 35), which allows Edna to become the open, responsive person she eventually does become. Adèle draws from Edna the remembrances of childhood and leads Edna into the exploration of the significance of her youthful fantasies (in Chapter VII). The influence of Mrs. Ratignolle in loosening Edna's reserve is fully visible by the end of the scene in which they talk on the beach: "She /Edna/ was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom" (p. 48). Partially through Adèle's influence, Edna is now prepared for the significant swim--her rebirth into childhood.

Adèle's most important influence comes as the result of trying to reverse the process which she in part helped to effect in Edna. Adèle poses the question which propels Edna swiftly toward the achievement of her ultimate awakening and regeneration--reminding Edna to think of the children (p. 289). Not only does this advice, along with the consideration given to it by Edna, signal Edna's rebirth, but a much more subtle development is concluded with the end of the birth scene. This scene not only marks the birth of a new Ratignolle, but also it marks the ability of Edna to be reborn. Edna's growth throughout the novel parallels the period of Adèle Ratignolle's gestation; Edna grows through a new childhood now to a new maturity--a maturity in which she is capable of being decisive, of acting in accordance with her own will.

Whereas Adèle Ratignolle, as a mother-woman, represents the alternative of self-sacrifice and involvement with family, Mademoiselle

Reisz is representative of quite the opposite extreme. She is the epitome of self-assertion; also quarrelsome, she has "a disposition to trample upon the rights of others" (p. 64). Between the characters of Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, Chopin affords Edna living pictures of the alternatives of behavior she contemplates.

Like her opposite, Reisz also prepares Edna for her first awakening. On the night of the fulfilling encounter with the sea, Edna's emotions are aroused by the little artist's music (p. 66). Mademoiselle Reisz uses her music to touch and prepare Edna several times throughout the novel--specifically to heighten Edna's responses to the letters of Robert. However, more significant to Edna's growth and outcome is the advice which Reisz, like Adèle, gives Edna. Reisz defines the artist, the true individual, as "'The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies'" (p. 165). This is Edna's option if she is to continue a life of disregard for social propriety. In addition, Mademoiselle Reisz checks Edna's "wings" to see if she is capable of achieving the free status of the artist/creator. Edna relates to Arobin the Mademoiselle's explanation:

> "'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.'" (p. 217)

These two comments are of particular importance to the end of the novel, where they are specifically alluded to by the author. After walking into the sea, Edna thinks of the reaction Reisz would have

toward her final act (p. 302). However, Edna ironically fails to realize that she is committing an act of the utmost courage.[1] Although the fluttering bird is literally introduced (pp. 300-301), she will not flutter back to earth. Edna does escape and soar beyond the realm of tradition, of the earth.

The three characters we have discussed to this point provide stimuli against which, and as a result of which, Edna responds. However, with Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin, Chopin allows her heroine the privilege of interaction. The author's use of Arobin seems relatively easy to determine and can be briefly discussed before examining the role that Robert plays in the novel. In Robert's absence, Arobin offers an outlet for Edna's expanding responsiveness. He is used primarily to clarify Edna's physical awakening, her awakening to the senses. This, however, is only one aspect of Edna's total development, which is essentially and ultimately spiritual when fully realized. Arobin likewise figures into the conclusion Edna reaches concerning the decision that she must make: "'To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else'" (p. 299).

Robert Lebrun, quite unlike Arobin or any of the other characters, develops in a fashion somewhat parallel to Edna. Robert begins to be awakened to new sensations and begins his growth following Edna's swim. However, before that point, Robert's significance as a character is the result of his role as an initiator. Until the swim Robert is essentially uninvolved with Edna, but nevertheless shares

in the responsibility of bringing Edna out from her reserve. Neither innocent nor malicious, Robert is a tempter with the experience to know by what means Edna's senses may become responsive—he draws Edna toward the enchanting water. Robert, more than anyone, is responsible for the timing of Edna's first awakening. Prior to the night of the swim, Robert accustoms Edna to the delicious harmlessness of the sea (p. 31). However, when the night comes, it is Robert who requests that Mademoiselle Reisz play; and, following the stirring music, it is suggested that Robert "thought of a bath at that mystic hour and under that mystic moon" (p. 67).

Following Edna's swim, Robert, because of his understanding of what has taken place in Edna, is drawn into a closer relationship with her. When he realizes his new awakening, unlike Edna, he sees the futility of a continued relationship and chooses to depart for Mexico. From Robert's letters to Mademoiselle Reisz and the subsequent conversations between Reisz and Edna, we become gradually more aware of the significance of his departure. Not until Robert returns and he and Edna confront one another again does the parallel become clear. As Edna lives in a world of illusion following her swim, Robert, while in Mexico, also succumbs to the desire for the fulfillment of dream. His return to New Orleans is prompted by the desire to realize the "dreaming of wild, impossible things" (p. 281). More significant, however, Robert is prepared to return to reality, although his senses are momentarily enthralled by the desire to hold onto the dream (p. 284). Yet following Edna's return from Adèle

Ratignolle's, Robert makes a determined decision, as revealed in the note he has left: "'I love you. Good-by--because I love you'" (p. 294). Robert has again faced the reality that a continued relationship with Edna would always border on, but never achieve, fulfillment as an ideal.

Although Robert's note and his acceptance of reality indicate the parallel between his growth and Edna's, his manner of departure also is largely responsible for making Edna face the choices and make a decision. But important in the consideration of her decision are Edna's children. They are for the most part invisible in the action of the novel but are nevertheless ever-present in Edna's consciousness. Edna realizes that they may become the innocent victims of her actions. Edna reveals to Adèle Ratignolle at one point: "'I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself'" (p. 122). When Edna considers the children in her final decision, they are"like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (p. 300). To remain true to her own independence of soul and the will, Edna, in her final act, is paradoxically sacrificing her life for her children. By eluding the power of obligation, the power which may command the sacrifice of the will, invested in the children by society, Edna is also avoiding the possibility that she may trample on the rights and needs of her children. In this sense, Edna is essentially, through action, delivering the message she

had received from Robert to her children: "'Good-by--because I love you.'"

The remaining minor characters allow Chopin to elaborate and complement further the contrasts between the major characters. Chopin uses Victor Lebrun much in the same way that she uses Mademoiselle to contrast with the female characters. Victor--insensitive, indulgent, and irresponsible--provides a contrast with the cool propriety of Léonce Pontellier and the increasing warmth of his sensitive brother, Robert. During the dinner party, the picture of Victor evokes the only response of Gouvernail[2]:

"'There was a graven image of Desire
Painted with red blood on a ground of gold.'" (p. 234)

Victor, the embodiment of sensuousness, reminds Edna of the excitation of her senses with Robert on Grand Isle. Victor's companion, Mariequita, the mysterious and pretty Spanish girl, appears immediately after each of Edna's awakenings in the novel. Mariequita appears for the first time on the boat to the Chênière, the morning following Edna's swim (p. 84). She is again present at Grand Isle when Edna returns at the novel's end to act upon the decision reached during the previous night (p. 295). Mariequita provides an added contrast with Edna at these significant moments; the picture of Mariequita's innocence emphasizes the sophistication of Edna's development. Additionally significant as minor characters, during the Grand Isle portion of the novel, are the ever-present figures of the young lovers and the lady in black. Through these anonymous figures, the

contrast between solitude and companionship is continually kept in view. At the same time, the lady in black, constantly engaged in devotions, and the young lovers, constantly engaged in the exchange of endearments, provide a significant contrast between spiritual love and physical, earthly love (e.g., p. 40).

Equally as important as Chopin's use of character in The Awakening, is the revealing pattern of imagery throughout. Chopin weaves obscure patterns that span the entire novel and provide indications of tone and setting as well as the more obvious images that carry symbolic significance. For the most part, traditional images are used, along with their traditional implications, to enhance the pattern of rebirth that we have noted. The most prominent and significant images used by Chopin are those of heat and cold, of light and dark, of birds, of music, and of water.

A broad pattern of heat and cold is present from the beginning of the novel to the end and sheds significant light on its outcome. The setting of the novel develops from the heat of summer to the cold of winter and ends with spring at hand. This pattern emerges to provide credence for the suggestion of Edna's rebirth at the end of the novel. In addition, at specific points in the novel heat is used directly to indicate passion--exemplifying another of its traditional uses. A particularly good example of this occurs just before Mademoiselle Reisz gives Edna Robert's letter announcing his intention to return. Foreshadowing the excitement and passion Edna feels at the news, Chopin uses heat imagery: "The little stove was

roaring; it was red-hot, and the chocolate in the tin sizzled and sputtered" (p. 209).

The use of light (sun) and dark by Chopin is pervasive and most effective. The sun is prolifically used as a conventional symbol of the life force. Mademoiselle Reisz even refers to Edna in terms of the sun: "'Ah! here comes the sunlight!' exclaimed Mademoiselle, rising from her knees before the stove. 'Now it will be warm and bright enough; I can let the fire alone'" (p. 205). In a particularly ripe combination of sun imagery, water imagery, and sexual imagery (of which there is very little), Chopin presents the intimacy felt by Edna and Robert at the Chênière. Robert explains and Edna responds to what they might do at the Grande Terre:

> "Climb up the hill to the old fort and look at the little wriggling gold snakes, and watch the lizards sun themselves."
>
> She gazed away toward Grande Terre and thought she would like to be alone there with Robert, in the sun, listening to the ocean's roar and watching the slimy lizards writhe in and out among the ruins of the old fort. (p. 88)

Chopin further establishes the sun as a vital force by making her protagonist virtually dependent upon it: "When the weather was dark and cloudy Edna could not work. She needed the sun to mellow and temper her mood to the sticking point" (p. 191). Perhaps most significantly, corresponding to Edna's awakening from illusion to a universal reality, the sun is shining as she commits her final act. In contrast to her first awakening--the swim--in the dim

light (but light nevertheless), Edna's ultimate awakening is fulfilled in the presence of the life force. There is some use of the shift from dark to light at the first of the final chapter, foreshadowing and creating the tone for Edna's walk in the sea. Edna appears from nowhere before Victor and Mariequita, as if an apparition (p. 296). Making this "vision" even more effective is the description of Edna as "Venus rising from the foam" that Victor had just given Mariequita (p. 295).

We have already noted the significance of the most prominent use of bird imagery in Mademoiselle Reisz's "parable" of the soaring bird (see above, pp. 33-34). But, in addition to this important usage, there exists a broad contrast between the use of winged creatures at both the novel's beginning and end. The novel begins with the raucous noise created by the caged parrot and the mocking-bird (p. 1), and it ends with the peaceful humming of bees (p. 303). The development of the novel between these two points parallels the shift in Edna from society to solitude. Despite the gregarious nature of the bee, it is the auditory aspect of these images that is especially effective in providing a conclusion to be derived from the contrast.

Musical imagery is also used to provide the same shift in atmosphere from the first of the novel to the last. We have already examined its specific usefulness in acting as a stimulus against which Edna reacts. In addition, however, the shift from society to solitude is fully supported through Chopin's allusions to music.

The novel opens with the bustling, active, and lively duet from "Zampa" (p. 3). As the action progresses, the music of Chopin (Frederic) and Wagner takes precedence--music of depth and emotion. The novel ends, as already noted, with the hum of bees--the hum being indicative of the most restful and soothing of musical sounds.

The most important images used in The Awakening are those relative to water, though in fact it may be inaccurate to say that water is used as an image in the novel; for the sea is personified and is as powerful an influence on Edna as any of the characters. Following Edna's first "fulfilling" encounter with the sea, Robert invests it with human qualities, referring to the Gulf Spirit:

> "With its own penetrating vision the spirit seeks some one mortal worthy to hold him company, worthy of being exalted for a few hours into realms of the semi-celestials. His search has always hitherto been fruitless, and he has sunk back, disheartened, into the sea. But to-night he found Mrs. Pontellier. Perhaps he will never wholly release her from the spell." (pp. 74-75)

More than Robert, the Gulf Spirit is responsible for Edna's first awakening; Robert has served only to introduce her into the domain of the sea. Previously, however, the sea has not been powerless to effect its own influence on Edna:

> The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

> The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (p. 34)

Chopin uses the sea as the conventional archetype of rebirth and regeneration.[3] As a result of her climactic first swim, Edna is reborn into a new childhood. Likewise, at the novel's end, Edna accepts the permanent invitation of the sea. Chopin repeats verbatim the lines immediately above at the end of the novel (pp. 300, 301), deleting only the portion which allows Edna to wander only "for a spell." Edna returns to the Gulf Spirit for permanent relief--the spirit Robert had facetiously predicted might not wholly release Edna. If Chopin is using her images consistently--and we have no reason to suspect otherwise--then Edna's decision to return to the sea which had first awakened her supports the suggestion of her rebirth at the novel's conclusion.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

The Awakening appears to be the conclusive discussion and exploration of a thematic motif that pervades much of Kate Chopin's work. The motif in point is that of the caged animal discovering freedom outside the restriction of the cage. As briefly mentioned previously (see above, p. 18, n. 3), the source for this motif is an early Chopin sketch, "Emancipation. A Life Fable." An unpublished sketch written near 1869 or 1870, it is perhaps the first sketch penned by Mrs. Chopin and indicates more than a passing interest in a theme that would appear again:

> There was once an animal born into this world, and opening his eyes upon Life, he saw above and about him confining walls, and before him were bars of iron through which came air and light from without; this animal was born in a cage.
>
> Here he grew, and throve in strength and beauty under care of an invisible protecting hand. Hungering, food was ever at hand. When he thirsted water was brought, and when he felt the need of rest, there was provided a bed of straw upon which to lie: and here he found it good, licking his handsome flanks, to bask in the sun beam that he thought existed but to lighten his home.

Awakening one day from his slothful rest, lo! the door of his cage stood open: accident had opened it. In the corner he crouched, wondering and fearingly. Then slowly did he approach the door, dreading the unaccustomed, and would have closed it, but for such a task his limbs were purposeless. So out the opening he thrust his head, to see the canopy of the sky grow broader, and the world waxing wider.

Back to his corner but not to rest, for the spell of the Unknown was over him, and again and again he goes to the open door, seeing each time more Light.

Then one time standing in the flood of it; a deep indrawn breath--a bracing of strong limbs, and with a bound he was gone.

On he rushes, in his mad flight, heedless that he is wounding and tearing his sleek sides--seeing, smelling, touching of all things; even stopping to put his lips to the noxious pool, thinking it may be sweet.

Hungering there is no food but such as he must seek and ofttimes fight for; and his limbs are weighted before he reaches the water that is good to his thirsting throat.

So does he live, seeking, finding, joying and suffering. The door which accident had opened is open still, but the cage remains forever empty![1]

The parallel between the animal and Edna Pontellier, almost thirty

years later, is striking. Edna, like the animal, having once tasted freedom, cannot return to a life of restraint.

Kate Chopin had explored several facets of this motif in previous stories before arriving at the treatment she gives it in The Awakening. In stories like "The Maid of Saint Phillippe" and "A Sentimental Soul," Chopin explores and depicts women who break from restraint to remain in the realms of self-willed freedom. In "The Going Away of Liza," Chopin presents a woman for whom the struggle becomes too difficult, who yields and returns submissively to the cage. Athenaïse, in the story by the same name, is very much like Edna in the motivation for her break from the cage. But, in this story, Chopin provides this particular character with the means by which to find the return to the cage (of marriage) both acceptable and tolerable---Athenaïse becomes pregnant. The closest parallel to the caged-animal motif before The Awakening is to be found in "The Story of an Hour." In this story, Chopin explores the woman thrust into the world of freedom by the supposed death of her husband. Like the animal in freedom, this woman begins to revel in the thought of belonging to herself again; self-assertion becomes "the strongest impulse of her being."[2] When her husband appears, quite alive, the woman suddenly dies. Her death is attributed to the shock of joy at her husband's return; but it is apparent that Chopin is suggesting that, like the animal of the fable, once the woman had recognized the possibility for freedom, she could never suppress the yearning and go back into the cage.[3]

In The Awakening, Chopin, for the first time, explores the woman for whom neither the cage nor freedom is acceptable. Edna has experienced reality and the freedom from reality, and neither has proved satisfying; thus, she is denied the choice of one as an alternative. Just as Edna escaped from the cage of social reality, so now does she feel the need to escape the unbearable freedom in the sun. There can be no alternative but to escape to the only unexplored realm left--death. Death is the only unknown state remaining with the potential for providing the thorough and absolute peace and solitude sought by Edna.

Edna chooses to enter this realm of death through the water. Her death by water reinforces the suggestion of escape and holds, at the same time, the promise of regeneration and rebirth. Edna is saved from virtual death in a life with no happiness or direction. Her ultimate awakening is the recognition of death-in-life in her continued physical existence. This awakening results in Edna's salvation from earthly death and suggests that the desire held by Edna throughout the novel--to unite body with thought (pp. 75, 290)--is finally realized.

NOTES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

[1] *Kate Chopin. A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).

[2] p. 138.

[3] p. 162.

[4] p. 147.

[5] p. 142.

[6] p. 199.

[7] *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932).

[8] p. 171.

[9] *Edna* (Paris: Didier, 1953), pp. 1-22.

[10] *The Awakening* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), p. vii.

[11] p. viii.

[12] p. vii.

[13] Eble, The Awakening, p. xii.

[14] "The Awakening of Kate Chopin" (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970); reprinted in Leary's Southern Excursions (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), pp. 159-175.

[15] Leary, Southern Excursions, p. 175.

[16] p. 167.

[17] p. 174.

[18] p. 171.

[19] The American 1890s (New York: Viking Press, 1966).

[20] p. 304.

[21] "Kate Chopin's The Awakening in the Perspective of Her Literary Career," Essays in American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell, ed. Clarence Gohdes (Durham: Duke University Press, 1967), pp. 215-228.

[22] p. 227. Arms invokes the intentional fallacy to extract Chopin's "basic realism" as determined from a review she wrote of Zola's Lourdes.

[23] "Local Color in The Awakening," Southern Review, 6 (1970), 1031-1040.

[24] "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's The Awakening," American Literature, 43 (January 1972), 580-589.

[25] p. 582.

CHAPTER II: REVELATIONS OF STRUCTURE

[1] Kate Chopin, The Awakening, with an introduction by Kenneth Eble (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), p. 33. Hereafter, page references in my text will be to this edition of the novel.

[2] The Gulf Spirit is discussed in more depth in the next chapter, p. 42.

[3] The sketch referred to here is "Emancipation. A Life Fable." This point is returned to and given further discussion in proposing a conclusion to this study; see Chapter IV.

CHAPTER III: TECHNIQUE

[1] Although we can only speculate on Kate Chopin's familiarity with Nietzsche, if we view Edna's end as courageous, the parallel with Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Part One, "On the Three Metamorphoses /of the spirit/" is striking; see Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Viking Press, 1966), pp. 25-28.

[2] Gouvernail figures prominently in several other works by Chopin. Perhaps his most important appearance is in the short story, "Athenaïse." Gouvernail is consistently characterized as a sensitive, perceptive, and compassionate man.

[3] A most valuable comparison might be made between Chopin's thematic use of water (and bird) imagery and Whitman's use of the same imagery in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

[1] In The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, ed. Per Seyersted, Vol. I (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), pp. 37-38. Quoted by permission of the Louisiana State University Press.

[2] Seyersted, ed., Complete Works, p. 353.

[3] Kate Chopin by no means limits herself to the treatment of women in relation to the caged-animal motif. At Fault, Chopin's other novel, is concerned with David Hosmer's break, subsequent return, and final freedom from the cage of marriage.

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